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FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5749
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0181
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 3753
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 7279
RUDKIA/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 0863
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 3056
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0707
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000185

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STATE FOR EAP AND IO; PACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/11/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: BURMA: FRUSTRATION SURFACES IN RANGOON

Classified By: P/E Chief Leslie Hayden for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (U) Summary: On February 22, thirty demonstrators gathered in front of Rangoon City Hall to protest Burma's deteriorating economic and social conditions in one of the largest public demonstrations in years. A crowd of two hundred gathered to watch the event. Some shouted to the demonstrators to stop, while others encouraged them. Protesters were beaten and arrested, and journalists covering the event were detained and questioned. Using one of its typical patterns of intimidation, the regime has also detained several of the protesters' family members. The demonstration appeared to take the regime by surprise and revealed increasing popular frustration with the regime's political repression and economic mismanagement. End summary.

12. (U) On February 22, a group of approximately thirty activists calling themselves the Myanmar Development Committee gathered in downtown Rangoon near City Hall to protest Burma's worsening economic and social conditions. The group was led by U Ohn Than, an ex-NLD member and activist who recently staged a demonstration outside NLD headquarters on Union Day calling for the party to become more active and for UN intervention in Burma. The protesters gathered a few blocks away around 3:35 p.m. and marched to a busy bus stop near Sule Pagoda and Rangoon City Hall. The demonstrators carried signs and shouted slogans demanding better electricity service, lower rice prices, better healthcare and education, and an end to government injustice and corruption. The protesters also distributed several copies of an open letter to Than Shwe "from the Burmese people" that highlighted seventeen of the regime's economic and social failures and warned that Burma would be ruined if these issues were not addressed soon. The letter was respectful in tone and concluded by offering "best wishes" to all officers in the Burmese military, including the Senior Generals.

13. (C) The demonstration lasted about twenty minutes while a crowd of about two hundred gathered to watch, including local reporters for international press. When the police arrived they began to beat the protesters. Some of the participants were arrested, while others escaped into the crowd. Special Branch sources informed us today the police are currently

holding seven people for participating in yesterday's demonstration. Other sources told us that last night and this morning police detained several of the demonstrators' family members and that more arrests are expected.

14. (C) Among those detained yesterday were three journalists: local correspondents for Kyodo and Nipon Television, and a Burmese journalist, May Tha Gyan Hein, who is the daughter of an NLD MP-elect from Shan State. May Tha Gyan Hein told us that she and her colleagues were taken to City Hall and interrogated by a military officer for about one hour. Afterwards, the journalists were moved to the Rangoon Police Special Branch headquarters at Eight Mile Junction. There the journalists were interrogated separately on how they had known the demonstration was going to take place and how they intended to use the information they had gathered. Before they were released, they were asked to serve as government witnesses, if necessary, at a future date. When the journalists' cameras were returned to them, several of the pictures they had taken of the demonstration had been deleted. Surprisingly, the regime's mouthpiece daily "The New Light of Myanmar" gave further publicity to the demonstrators today in a story accusing them of staging a riot to incite public "dislike and disrespect" for the government. The article stated that the Myanmar Development Committee was an illegal group and that members would likely be prosecuted.

15. (C) We were tipped off to the demonstration in advance and sent two Embassy employees to observe the event. They reported that reaction from the crowd was mixed. Vendors located near the area shouted to the demonstrators that they would only make things worse, while younger observers shouted their support and told them they were brave. One of our

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employees overheard a middle-aged man predict to someone, who appeared to be his son, that this demonstration was only the beginning and that larger protests would likely follow.

16. (SBU) Comment: Yesterday's demonstration caught the regime off-guard. As conditions in Burma worsen, pressure builds. Ethnic minority and urban youth who are cut off from opportunities by repression, a failing educational system, and the worsening economy are growing more and more desperate. Those who argue that only the military regime can maintain stability in Burma are ignoring the fact that it is the regime's economic and social mismanagement that is most responsible for increasing popular frustration and fomenting widespread social unrest. End comment.
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